

Families Taking Charge Accepting Your Feelings

Introduction

People respond to unemployment with many feelings: anger, anxiety, outrage, self-doubt. They may be hostile -- lashing out at those closest to them. Or, they may become moody and depressed. Their tension may show up as restlessness, loss of appetite, loss of interest in sex, insomnia, and feelings of apathy and exhaustion. While some of these symptoms may be unpleasant, they are normal, predictable reactions of people experiencing a loss or critical change in their lives.

Recognizing these strong feelings, understanding why they may be present, and dealing with them in positive ways is important. Refusing to accept your feelings can cause physical and emotional damage.

The first step to accepting feelings is to sort out and identify your feelings. Some feelings -- often those that are painful -- may become so buried you may not even be aware they exist.

Anger Has Many Causes

One of the first feelings you will probably identify is anger. Anger is a powerful emotion that is often viewed negatively. Unchecked, it can escalate into a rage that may erupt in damaging emotional outbursts or be unleashed on family members.

Unchecked anger can be an emotional "time bomb" exploding when triggered by little things such as a glass of spilled milk or a spouse asking how the job hunt went today.

Looking beyond the anger, you may begin to uncover many other emotions hidden underneath. Anger may stem from feelings of failure, being unappreciated, exploited, manipulated, uncared for or humiliated. It may be caused by feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, frustration, anxiety, guilt, fear or resentment.

Once you begin to look at the variety of feelings behind the anger and to understand the hidden feelings, you can find ways to express your feelings in positive ways.

Coping With Your Anger

- Look behind your anger. Remember exactly where you were when you first felt it. Who was with you? How did you feel at the time?
- Ask yourself if your anger is reasonable. Are you expecting too much from yourself or someone else? Are you looking at your situation objectively?
- Look at your reaction to the anger. Was the behavior justified? Did it increase your stress level or threaten your relationship with those around you? If so, look immediately for more appropriate ways to discharge your anger. Talk to others about your feelings, change what you can about your situation, view it more realistically, or use relaxation techniques to vent your stress.
- Anger is often fueled by blame. Blaming yourself or others is a way of avoiding the real problem. The energy you spend blaming could be better spent on working to understand your feelings.

Damage to Self-Esteem

Feeling good about yourself, or having positive self-esteem, is one of the most valuable assets you can have. Self-esteem develops as we grow from childhood into adulthood. The love and acceptance we get from parents, family members and friends shapes our self-esteem. It's linked to how competent and successful we feel.

Having positive feelings about yourself is easier when things go well. When things take a turn for the worse, you often lose some of your self-confidence and begin to doubt yourself.

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Whether it's your first time being unemployed, or whether you have been without a job before, you may feel a sense of loss that extends well beyond losing a paycheck. Work contributes to your identity. It helps define who you are and makes you part of a larger community. Working helps you feel you belong and are important because you have something to contribute.

In many ways, losing a job is like losing a part of yourself. Your lifestyle suddenly changes. Schedules and routines that controlled a large part of your time are no longer there. You lose contact with former co-workers and friends.

Many unemployed people report going through a process of grief and mourning in response to a job loss. This loss is characterized by stages of denial, anger, depression and finally acceptance. With the help of those around them, most people eventually work out ways of dealing with their feelings. They make adjustments that help them recover from their loss and put it in perspective.

Understanding Your Feelings

If you are not used to thinking about your feelings, identifying them during this stressful period may be difficult. The following activity may help you recognize and accept your feelings.

Use the chart Thinking About Your Feelings to list feelings you may have experienced since losing your job. As you read over the list, think about which feelings you have experienced and when you experienced them.

Remember, it's okay to have these feelings. They are all natural reactions to a job loss. Recognizing their existence and accepting them is important to your mental health.

Steps to Accepting Your Feelings

- Recognize your feelings; don't try to ignore them. Although it's sometimes painful, confronting your feelings and looking realistically at your situation are important steps to being able to cope.
- Talk with your family. The feelings you have may be shared by other family members. By talking about your feelings, you can help each other express, vent and accept these feelings in constructive ways. Together you can provide support and reassurance to one another that can help build more positive self-esteem.
- Talk with others. Don't keep your feelings bottled up inside. Talking to others who have been or who are in similar situations can provide needed support. By discussing your feelings, you'll find you're not alone.

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- Take mental health breaks. Think of ways to reduce the emotional tension and stress you're experiencing. Include regular physical exercise in your daily routine to help you work off your worries and help your overall well-being. Take some time for the things you enjoy.
- Make the most of your time. Don't get in the habit of sleeping late or spending your time in front of the television. How many times in the past have you wished you had more time to spend with your kids, to work on projects around the house, visit friends, go fishing or catch up on some reading? When stress is high and you're feeling down, you may not be in the mood to try new things. But these feelings don't last forever. Once you have worked through them, put your time to good use. Working on projects, starting a hobby or doing volunteer work can help you feel more productive and may lead to new employment opportunities.
- Evaluate your situation. If it looks like your unemployment may be permanent, shift gears and begin looking for other types of work. You may want to get help analyzing your skills and finding out about any additional training that can help you qualify for another job or career. Doing this before your benefits run out can brighten your prospects for reemployment.
- Recognize the need for professional help. The feelings associated with a job loss are very powerful and may be difficult to deal with on your own. Talking to a trained professional can help you work through your feelings and restore your self-esteem.

Staff at Mental Health, Employee Assistance Programs, or at private counseling agencies may be able to help you and your family.

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